

Nowhere To Hide

by Tim Ellington

Lieutenant Donat Thurren completed his security check. "Area six reads clear, sir. No activity on the perimeter."

"Nothing." The monotone of James Howler's voice did little to hide his surly disposition.

"Blake says there may be a few more dust bunnies in the B tunnel..." Thurren cut himself off as Howler shot a glance at him... "Sir."

Colonel Howler turned back to the glowing wall of displays that monitored the CGC mining complex at Bekker's Trench. The massive ore mining and processing facility covered 17 square kilometers of Ganymede's rugged surface. In addition to the mine itself, the complex contained a commercial depot consisting of three large, domed craters; a maintenance compound, which housed the life-support machinery and a repair facility; and a landing pad. The Bekker's Trench complex was the largest Earther off-world mining operation, and a valuable base on Ganymede. The CGC was currently converting the large depot into a staging area for their military presence around Jupiter.

All non-essential civilians had evacuated the depot several weeks earlier when Ganymede saw increased action at the edge of the "front line." The domes — called "bubbles" by the local miners — housed a skeleton mining crew. As of the past two weeks, Howler's squadron of GR-Blades was housed in the bubbles, with Alpha troop in the smaller of the two cargo domes. Bravo and Charlie were in the large dome, along with a troop of a dozen juggernauts. Large, underground tunnels connected the cargo domes to each other and the main dome. The miners were happy that Howler's group had been sent to guard their facility. Howler and his troops were not.

A dedicated soldier, Howler was determined to carry out his assignment with the same diligence and duty he had shown throughout his career. But there was no disguising his disappointment at having been assigned garrison duty at a mining facility on Ganymede. His Blades were a top-notch combat unit, and with the Shi and Quay currently carving out big sections of space — and valuable resources — he felt his men and women were needed elsewhere. He didn't question the importance of the mining operation, or the people who ran it, but *anybody* could guard these holes in the ground.

CISyn briefed Howler of a strong possibility of an attempt to capture the facility. Howler understood the situation, as resources were valuable on the Rim these days. More so than usual with damned aliens trying to grab everything. But neither the Shi nor the Quay had tried direct assaults on fortified locations in this area, and the Mavericks and Gongen didn't have the firepower available locally to mount a threat. The other factions that had detachments on Ganymede were doing the same thing as the CGC, hunkering down and protecting what they held. No one wanted to risk making an effort to grab anyone else's claim on Ganymede, spreading themselves too thin and risking losing what they already had. At least not yet, anyway. Having Howler's unit here was like having a juggernaut in the kitchen to keep the kids out of the cookie jar.

Howler kept his eyes on the situation reports of the master display. Everything was normal, just like it had been when they arrived eight days ago.

"Well," Howler broke the awkward silence without looking at his lieutenant, "tell Blake to keep an eye on them, just in case."

Thurren smiled as he turned to leave the control room. Howler might be upset about being posted here, but that didn't mean he was going to drop his guard. That never happened.

"What's the word from the top?" Sheria Coreg asked as Thurren returned to the barracks after his report to Howler. She was the first to return to the sleeping quarters and the only other person in the room. She was lying on her bunk propped up on an elbow, watching Thurren as he flopped down onto his bunk. "Anything new?"

"Not a thing. Howler keeps staring at those monitors like he's going to make something happen by force of will. I'm tempted to set off a motion sensor in one of the bubbles just to give the man something to do. It's too damn quiet around here."

"Of course it's quiet. Who would come in here with the way we've got the place locked down?" Coreg shifted her slim, muscular frame and sat up on her bunk. "I don't see why you guys can't relax and take a breather. God knows you've earned it after the action you've seen."

"That's just it," Thurren replied, a more serious tone to his voice. "We're a combat unit — that's what we do. Sitting around day after day dulls the senses. It's not just annoying, it's dangerous. You're new. You haven't been in combat yet. 'Complacency leads to compromise,' that's Howler's favorite saying. I know it sounds sick, and trust me, nobody *likes* combat, but if you want to survive, you have to stay sharp. The longer we sit here, the more we get comfortable. That's when we might miss something, or just flat out make a mistake. That's what's got Howler's cheeks clenched so tight. He knows the danger of *nothing* happening."

"That sounds more like paranoia than logic," Coreg said, getting up and walking over to the wall at the end of the row of beds. She stopped a meter from the wall and looked up towards the ceiling. "But I trust you know what you're talking about. I may be green, but I'm smart enough to listen to a soldier with field experience... you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Thurren asked.

"That. That noise. It sounds like it's coming from the air vent." Her blue eyes squinted.

"I don't hear anything."

"C'mon, Lieutenant, right there... that whistling sound. Listen." She brushed back her dark hair from one ear.

Thurren held his breath and listened.

"I don't hear anything. You can't hear those things running. They make these handlers to run silent because the miners used to complain about the resonant echo in the bubbles. You're just imagining things."

"I know what I hear," Coreg huffed. "I may be a rookie, but my hearing checked out fine at my last physical."

Six more soldiers came into the room and started getting ready to turn in. With their conversations mixing with the noise from the hallway, Thurren looked at Sheria and shrugged. They forgot about the air vent and headed back to their bunks to get ready for their rest cycle.

Howler leaned over the tactician's shoulder and asked yet again, "Anything on the remote sensors?"

"Nothing, sir." CISyn guru Grem Holden tried to be patient with the colonel's building frustration.

"Why the hell doesn't this place have more long-range scanners?" he grumbled. "How can you defend a position when you're blind?"

"This was — and still is — a mining operation, sir. I don't think they planned to use it as a military base."

"Yeah, well, that's what it is now, isn't it? If they didn't think there was a good chance of an attack, we wouldn't be here, would we? And if they took the trouble to put my men here, you'd think they would've sent a few remote sat links our way so we could at least do our jobs."

"I'm sure they have a plan, sir. I know the CGC was conducting meetings on how to address the Ganymede issue when I was assigned to your group."

"Plans and meetings!" Howler fumed. "Wonderful. That'll be a big help when we've got Quay breathing down our necks. I'm sure they'll be happy to wait until we have a plan together before they drop in for lunch. At least they had sense enough to send us with some guns."

"Everything seems to be alright so far..."

Howler lowered his voice to a steely timbre, and stared hard into the young man's face. "If we aren't here for a fight, mister, why are *you* here?"

Holden looked back at the glaring face and resisted the urge to reply to Howler's barb. Instead, the guru turned back to the control panel and punched up a system diagnostic to have something to focus on. He would have loved to cut Howler down a notch, but he knew better. Howler wasn't the kind of guy to rub the wrong way — especially on his own turf. Holden refused to look up, keeping his eyes on the display. He occupied himself with the various scans generating reports.

Howler turned away and walked up a flight of steps to the observation level of the command center. Exasperated, he looked out through one of the dome's massive windows at the ore processing unit a couple of kilometers away. He stared at the machinery and struggled to bring his temper back under control. He made a mental note to throw Holden a bone later to make up for his own lack of discipline. He had to keep it together. He couldn't afford to fall victim to the mental trap this assignment had become.

Howler looked out over the blue-gray features of Jupiter's largest moon and tried to make sense of the situation. Despite the lack of any diversions, he still found it hard to concentrate. He looked out across the three-kilometer distance between the mining facility and the depot that housed his command center. He thought it strange that the processing unit was modified to collect the traginium by-products of the refinement operation. That was new. He had been to the Bekker's Trench facility before, during a previous assignment on the Rim when war was simply a hell populated by humans. Back then, all of the waste product was simply vented into space. Surely the vapor-thin atmosphere on Ganymede wasn't in danger of pollution from such a small emission. It couldn't be economical to have those collectors installed, he thought to himself, and the CGC wasn't known for its environmental concerns involving off-world locations. In fact, it was the lack of regulations, combined with the shallow gravity well and disregard for the aftermath of mining, that made Ganymede such an attractive place to mine raw materials. Of course, not much made sense to him these days. If the heavens themselves could split apart and spew out such evil creatures as those damned Shi and Quay, then minor changes to a mining operation were not worth worrying about. Howler was deep into his ruminations when a voice called out from below.

"Colonel, there's something you may want to check out here," said Holden.

Howler cast a final glance out the window, wondering when he would find the answer to the puzzle in his mind. He knew something was coming. He could *feel* it. He just didn't know when, or where. But he had a strong sense of whom. He descended to the command level and returned to Holden's station. "What is it?" he asked, trying to sound friendlier than he had earlier.

"I was running a diagnostic program on some of the facility sub-systems, sir, and I noticed that one of the air handlers for the barracks section showed a drop in operating capacity. Not an immediate problem, but if it's not repaired, it will probably shut off in a couple of days. It's not a primary air supply line, but if it shuts down, it could get stuffy back in the barracks."

"Contact Jaspers, and have him meet me in my quarters at 0600. Tell him I've got an assignment for him."

"I don't care what your *instincts* say," Huxt laughed as he walked over to the edge of the raised steel platform overlooking the main shaft. "Nobody's fool enough to try and root us out of here. They didn't try to take it before we got here, and sure as hell they don't want to come looking for a fight now."

"Then what are we doing?" Chindon Relk replied, feigning impatience with the middle-aged sergeant he stood watch with. The two men paced back and forth over the nine square meters of the platform, which was hastily built to give the security detail an elevated view of the main chamber of the mining operation. "If somebody didn't think they knew something, we'd take half of the firepower we have here and move it somewhere else."

"Well, you're the CISyn man, you tell me. You're the info guys. We're just the boys who do the dirty work."

Relk had been trying to bait Huxt into an argument for more than 20 minutes. Huxt generally wasn't one for small talk, but most of the men who served with the veteran respected what the sergeant said when he did speak up. Relk was interested in what the other men knew. Or at least what they thought they knew.

"I don't know anything you don't know," answered Relk. "We sit in the same briefings. I'm just saying it feels like something's coming. Call it a hunch. I was just wondering if anybody else had the same feeling."

"You mean the feeling somebody's going to come through here and get a surprise ass-kicking? Yeah, we've all got that feeling," Huxt grinned.

"Go ahead and laugh," Relk shot back, the irritation in his voice real this time. "You wait. There's something out there, and I bet I'm not the only one who thinks so. Pretty soon we'll all be up to our armpits in it, instead of sitting here hiding and hoping nobody knows we're here."

Huxt stopped walking and turned to face the younger man at his side. He spoke in a serious tone that made Relk understand why his words carried so much weight with the other soldiers.

"Son, the whole universe is turned upside down now. There ain't nowhere to hide anymore."

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Jespers, the maintenance chief, asked as he entered Howler's quarters.

"I need you to take care of some repair work," Howler answered as he turned his desk chair towards the doorway. Howler's quarters were noticeably spartan — even more so than the normal Outer Rim decor. He didn't like distractions, and only kept close at hand what he needed for sleeping, dressing and making notes. Jespers noticed Howler was entering information into his wristcomp as he took a couple of steps inside the door.

"Repairs?" Jespers asked. "I didn't know any of the blades had problems."

"They don't. There's an air handler for the barracks area that needs some work. I want you to take your unit topside to the mechanical compound and take care of it."

"Why us? That's something the miners can handle. They have plenty of people for that kind of work. We're soldiers, remember? We work on fighting equipment."

"Soldiers who need something to do," Howler added. "I know it's busy work, but I'm worried about our men losing their edge. It'll give your guys something to focus on for a while."

Jespars understood. "Yes, sir."

"Commander Holden has the details and the schematics for the air handler. Check with him and then get your stuff together after breakfast."

Jespars nodded and turned to leave. "Could be worse," he said over his shoulder. "You could have asked us to fix that broken platform over by the mine shaft ventilator."

Howler looked up from his wristcomp and watched Jespers close the door behind him. He switched it to a comm channel. "Major Hexel?"

There was a brief delay. "Yes, Colonel?"

"I have an assignment for you."

"Where is everybody?" Vilmer asked, looking around the conference table and noting the empty seats.

Howler didn't look up from his comp. "Jespers, Major Hexel, and Captain Bintin are out on assignment and Thurren is just..."

"Late," Thurren added as he entered the meeting room and moved towards his seat. "Sorry, Colonel. I was going through the personnel files like you asked and lost track of time." Thurren sat down at the table for the morning debriefing. The three men were joined by Security Chief Bawsum, Captains Bertran and Waley of the GR-Blade Squadron, and Captain Anthon of the Dagger unit. The CISyn contingent was represented by Lieutenant Holden and Commander Jylan Rathe.

Sergeant Vilmer was Howler's top aide. He was Howler's main liaison with CISyn for the day-to-day operations in the command center. Bertran and Waley were two of Howler's most trusted men. They led the Bravo and Charlie troops of Howler's infamous GR-Blades. Thurren was the administrative officer for the Daggers, the new juggernaut unit recently put under Howler's command, and Bawsum had served with Howler since the Gongen Wars. Rathe and Holden were among the CISyn detachment assigned to his group upon their arrival on Ganymede.

"What's new, gentlemen?" Howler wasn't big on small talk, and the staff knew the routine, starting without any additional prompting.

"Everything is green at command post," Vilmer said. "Equipment operational and regular contact with HQ. Nothing new from the brass, just sit tight and guard the facility." Vilmer was a no-nonsense guy, like Howler. They shared a strong mutual respect, and Howler often asked Vilmer's opinion on issues concerning the management of the 180-plus soldiers under his command.

Thurren spoke next. "We added the leftover munitions from the previous security detail to our own store, sir, and completed a full inventory. The info is logged into the main database, and a copy was sent to your wristcomp for review."

"Bravo?" Howler looked over at Bertran. The stocky captain crossed his arms and leaned back into his chair.

"Bravo troop is combat ready, sir," he answered, making no effort to hide the boredom in his voice. "Just waiting for some strays to come sniffing around the doghouse."

"Charlie Blades are ready too, sir," added Waley.

Howler looked over at Anthon. "Poul? How about the Daggers?"

Captain Poul Anthon was a tall, muscular man in his mid-thirties. He looked tired, but forced a smile at Howler as he answered. "All the adjustments have been made to optimize performance in the gravity field on Ganymede, sir. We're ready to roll." He hesitated, then asked the question everyone else wanted to hear answered too. "Do you think we're going to need 'em, Colonel? I mean, we're just here on security detail, right? Are we really going to need twelve jugs rigged for combat on Ganymede?"

"I don't know," Howler answered bluntly. "But we've got them if we need them. Our job is to make sure this place stays wrapped up tight and running on schedule."

"But, Colonel," Anthon paused as he felt the eyes of the other men at the table staring at him, "If we get a call to move out, we'll have to realign the whole lot of 'em. Shouldn't we keep at least half of them set for general environment conditions just in case?" Half a dozen should be plenty. . . "

"Captain," Howler cut in, careful to keep a positive tone to his voice, "I know it seems like overkill, but I don't buy for a minute that this 'holiday' assignment is what it's spelled out to be. We're here for a reason. I don't know what it is yet, and I'm not sure HQ even knows for sure, but I intend on keeping the Blade squadron and the Daggers combat ready. If we do have to go into action, I want every tactical advantage we can get."

"Yes, sir," Anthon nodded.

"Where are the other men right now, Colonel, if I may ask?" Bawsum was a 23-year veteran, and had no problem cutting to the point with his commanding officer. He never questioned Howler's judgment, but he wasn't afraid to stick his nose in wherever he thought it belonged. "I'd like to make sure we have them adequately covered. We've had a couple of incidents lately with personnel moving around the complex without an escort." Bawsum looked directly at Rathe as he made his comment, but the CISyn commander didn't take his eyes off Howler.

"I thought you might," Howler said, a slight smile creasing his face for the first time all morning. "Jespers and his men are topside doing some repair work. I wanted to give them something to do for a change."

"Topside?" Bawsum asked. "What assets do we have out there?"

"It's not ours. Just an air handler. Mr. Holden ran across a unit going bad in a diagnostic last night, and we decided to fix it before it went out completely."

Holden smiled inwardly as Howler gave him credit. Howler could be a hard-ass, he thought, but he did know how to give his men a pat on the back when they deserved it.

"Air handler?" Thurren's interest in the conversation had just gone up a notch. "Where?"

"Barracks," Howler and Holden answered at the same time. Howler cut a look at Holden, who realized the credit he earned last night just got burned.

"Why?" Howler asked, turning back towards Thurren.

"Nothing really, sir. Just that Lieutenant Coreg told me last night she *heard* something in the air vent. Said something wasn't right. I didn't hear anything, but she was convinced she did. I guess maybe she was right after all. She'll be full of herself all day when I tell her about this."

"Coreg," Howler said. "She's new?"

"Yes, sir. She . . ."

The intercom in the meeting room suddenly interrupted the conversation.

"Colonel Howler, sir, we have incoming spacecraft. No IFF tags."

"On my way!" Howler replied. "Bawsum, put everyone on alert and keep a channel open for updates. Anthon, spin some Daggers up and get Jespers' group back to base now."

Howler turned to leave, the other officers standing to follow.

"Colonel," Bawsum asked before Howler went through the door, "what about Major Hexel and his men?"

"They'll be okay," Howler answered, not even turning around as he sped through the door.

As the group left to assume their ready stations, no one noticed Rathe sitting quietly, typing notes into his wristcomp.

"Report," Howler asked calmly as he entered the command area. Already the staff on duty was anxious and watched the Colonel closely as he assessed the situation.

"It's definitely not ours, sir," the technician answered. "I thought they might be headed for one of the encampments on the dark side, maybe just coming in a little low, but now they are dead on course for us, sir, and decelerating. Crap, that's a big one. My guess is it's Gongen, but they don't have anything that big that comes in that low . . . do they?"

"Looks like they do now," Howler answered. "Well, if he's coming in this low, it looks like he wants to drop some heat on us. I'm guessing he isn't expecting much resistance here. We'll have to take him out before he gets in range. How far are they out?"

"Thirty-five kilometers, sir."

The Colonel tapped his comm unit. "Anthon, status report."

"We're gearing up and heading out in about two minutes, Colonel. I've contacted Jespers and he's getting his crew together. They'll meet us at the mech building exit bay."

"Roger that. Poul, take a couple more Daggers with you, and set up a firing line with long-range guns. If it gets in range, we're going to take it down."

The technician activated the view screen, and programmed the external sensors to rotate towards the oncoming ship. The staff in the command area could see nothing but the bleak Ganymede horizon.

"It's still slowing down, sir, thirty-two clicks out . . ."

Everyone in the room stared intently at the screen, waiting for visual contact with the enemy vessel. Most of the staff shifted back and forth nervously at their stations, but Howler stood rock solid behind the tech station, waiting for the next development. When the Gongen ship appeared as a growing image in the center of the screen, no one spoke until the technician broke the silence with an update.

"Still slowing, sir. Fifteen kilometers. . ."

"I don't get it," Rathe interrupted. No one had noticed him entering the back of the room. "A boat like that coming into low orbit makes a damned big target."

"Colonel!" the guru shouted, snapping everyone's attention from Rathe back to the view screen. "It's deploying!"

Captain Tsien Shun, commander of the Gongen fleet carrier *Tachikaze*, watched intently as his troops and ground units emerged from the deployment transports on the surface below. The Ikazuchi assault force his ship had carried, complete with their powerful golden NoBot, was beginning to fall into formation in preparation for the attack on the Earther facility. He expected minimal resistance, and so far, the campaign had unfolded according to plan. His mission was simple — a quick strike to drive a wedge between Earther security forces at the mining facility and those at the control center of the cargo depot. Divide any resistance, take control of both facilities, and leave an occupying force after acquiring their primary objective.

As Tsien watched the Gongen soldiers advance on the Earther base, he marveled at the speed and mobility of the troops. *Tachikaze* was the newest of the Gongen carriers, specially designed for low-orbit insertions of rapid-deploy units. He smiled as he imagined what the Earther miners must be thinking as they watched the impressive advance of the "golden wave." The T.S.V.s and jet pack-equipped troops rapidly covered the ground between the drop zone and the Earther base. Soon the majestic NoBot and its close air support would be engaged as well. He was honored to be in command of such a magnificent force.

Major Tennaru Hari was surrounded by his men as they sped toward their target. He signaled for them to establish a rendezvous point closer to the cargo depot, about one-third of the distance to the mining operation. He assumed the Earther forces would have most of their security detachment guarding the valuable mine. This gave him some separation from his primary target and put him closer to the depot, which he expected to provide minimal resistance. As he mounted his attack on the mine, he would send a smaller group to secure the depot. Intelligence reports had indicated it to be empty, the Earthers having moved their stores and most of their personnel off Ganymede over the previous weeks.

Tennaru spotted six juggernauts near the exit bay of the mechanical building. More firepower than he had expected from a remote base such as this, but still no match for his superior forces. In a matter of minutes, he would begin the attack on the mine, and soon thereafter, Gongen would have control of the critical mining operation, as well as an entrenched garrison on Ganymede.

"Where the hell did all this come from?" Rathe yelled at no one in particular. "We were told a raid on the mine was expected, but this is a full-fledged goddamned invasion!"

"Sometimes the enemy changes his mind," Howler answered coldly as he watched the Gongen advance on his screen. "How far out is the Gongen carrier?"

"Just over twelve klicks, sir."

"He must have known we were here!" Rathe continued his rant in the control room. "He's just beyond the range of the Daggers' main guns."

"Colonel Howler," Vilmer interrupted, "Bravo and Charlie report they will be ready for launch in two minutes." He paused for a moment and added, "No word from Major Hexel and Alpha."

"Anthon," Howler spoke into his comm unit, "Split your Daggers at the mechanical building and try to bring Jespers' men back to the depot on the double. Send the others over to the mine and set up a defensive line."

"The other six jugs are ready to roll, Colonel. Should I send them to the mine too?"

"Not yet, Captain."

"Roger that."

Howler looked at the Gongen soldiers moving toward his command post. They covered ground quickly. He plotted in his mind where he thought the Gongen commander would launch his attack, and calculated a possible intercept. He didn't have a lot of options. He had known this was coming. He had just *known*. But he didn't expect such a large force.

"Colonel, I suggest you get your Blades out of the cargo areas and get ready to fight," Rathe called out from his monitoring station, where he had assumed his CISyn duties. "Or are you going to open the door and invite them in?"

"Not yet," was Howler's only reply.

"They already know we're here!" Rathe screamed.

"I don't think so," Howler answered calmly. "I think he's just being cautious. Just like I would do if I thought I had superior forces and wanted to minimize damage."

"Bravo and Charlie are ready to fly!" Vilmer called out. "Do we launch, sir?"

"Not yet," Howler said flatly, staring at the screen in front of him. "Not yet."

To be continued...